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Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 DHA-02 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-05 H-01
INR-07 L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01 SP-02
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E.O. 11652: N/A
TAGS: PINT, US, SCUL
SUBJECT: PRIME MINISTER MEETS WITH U.S. CONSERVATIVE AND REFORM RABBIS

1. SUMMARY: AN AMERICAN DELEGATION OF FOUR CONSERVATIVE AND FOUR REFORMED RABBIS IS CURRENTLY VISITING ISRAEL TO LOBBY AGAINST CHANGES IN THE LAW OF RETURN. IF ADOPTED THESE CHANGES WOULD RESTRICT THE RIGHTS TO SETTLE IN ISRAEL TO THOSE CONVERTS CONVERTED BY ORTHODOX RABBIS. CHANGES IN THE LAW WOULD ALSO AFFECT POTENTIAL IMMIGRATION FROM THE U.S. ESPECIALLY OF MIXED MARRIAGE COUPLES AS WELL AS SET BACK ATTEMPTS OF THE CONSERVATIVE AND REFORMED JEWISH COMMUNITIES TO GAIN FULLER RECOGNITION AND STATUS IN ISRAEL. THIS OF CONSIDERABLE IMPORTANCE TO AMERICAN JEWRY WHERE THESE TWO COMMUNITIES CONSTITUTE A MAJORITY. BEGIN'S SUPPORT FOR A CHANGE IN THE LAW OF RETURN WOULD ALMOST CERTAINLY STRAIN RELATIONS BETWEEN THE LIKUD GOVERNMENT AND IMPORTANT SEGMENTS OF THE AMERICAN JEWIS COMMUNITY. ALTHOUGH THE PRIME MINISTER CORDIALLY RECEIVED THE EIGHT RABBIS THEY HAVE SO FAR RECEIVED LITTLE SATISFACTION EITHER FROM THE GOVERNMENT OR THE RELIGIOUS AUTHORITIES. END SUMMARY.
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2. PRIME MINISTER BEGIN MET ON AUGUST 17 WITH EIGHT AMERICAN RABBIS REPRESENTING THE CONSERVATIVE AND REFORM SYNAGOGUES. THEY WERE RABBI STANLEY RABINOVITZ AND RABBI WOLF KELMAN, PRESIDENT AND VICE PRESIDENT OF THE CONSERVATIVE RABBINICAL COUNCIL, AND RABBIS SAUL TEPLITZ AND MOSHE TUTENAUER, ALSO OF THE CONSERVATIVE

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COUNCIL; RABBI ELY PILCHIK AND RABBI JOSEPH GLASER,
PRESIDENT AND VICE PRESIDENT OF THE REFORMED SYNAGOGUE
RABBINICAL COUNCIL, PLUS RABBI ALFRED GOTSCHALK AND
RABBI RICHARD HIRSCH, BOTH ALSO OF THE REFORMED SYNAGOGUE
COUNCIL. PARTICIPATING IN THE MEETING WERE MINISTER
OF THE INTERIOR AND POLICE YOSEPH BURG AND MINISTER OF
RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS AHARON ABU HATZEIRA. THE PREVIOUS
DAY THE GROUP HAD MET SEPARATELY WITH SEPHARDIC
CHIEF RABBI OVADIA YOSEF AND THE ASHKENAZI CHIEF RABBI
SHLOMO GOREN. THE CALLS ON THE CHIEF RABBIS WERE ANNOUNCED
AS COURTESY CALLS HOWEVER, SUBSEQUENTLY RABBI GOREN PUBLICLY DECLARED
HE COULD NOT ACCEPT THE RABBINICAL AUTHORITY OF PERSONS WHO DID
NOT EVEN KEEP THE SABBATH.

2. THE GROUP PRESENTED PREMIER BEGIN WITH A MEMO-
RANDUM OPPOSING PLANNED CHANGES IN THE LAW OF RETURN
WHICH WOULD MAKE THE RIGHT OF RETURN APPLICABLE ONLY
TO THOSE WHO ARE RECOGNIZED AS JEWS UNDER THE LAW
OF THE TORAH(HALACHA). IT ALSO CRITICIZED THE
PRESENT ISRAELI PRACTICE WHICH PERMITS CONVERTS TO
CONSERVATIVE OR REFORM JUDAISM TO IMMIGRATE TO ISRAEL,
BUT DOES NOT ALLOW THEM TO MARRY ISRAELI JEWS UNLESS
THEY REPEAT THEIR CONVERSION CEREMONY ACCORDING TO
ORTHODOX RITES. THE GROUP WARNED PUBLICLY THAT ANY
CHANGE IN THE RELIGIOUS STATUS QUO WOULD DISCOURAGE
ALYIAH AND UPSET MILLIONS OF AMERICAN JEWS, ALTHOUG
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THEY WOULD NOT NECESSARILY GO AS FAR AS TO ABANDON
THEIR SUPPORT OF ISRAEL.

3. NO PUBLIC STATEMENT WAS ISSUED ABOU THE DIS-
CUSSIONS WITH THE PRIME MINISTER EXCEPT TO SAY THAT
THE GROUP WOULD MEET AGAIN WITH HIM AND THAT THE
TENOR OF THE CONVERSATION HAD BEEN "FRIENDLY AND
CONSTRUCTIVE." REPORTEDLY MINISTER ABU HATZEIRA
PROPOSED THAT A RABBINICAL COUNCIL CONSISTING OF
ORTHODOX, CONSERVATIVE AND REFORM RABBIS BE
CONSTITUTED IN THE U.S. TO RULE ON THE VALIDITY OF
CONVERSATIONS. HOWEVER, THERE WAS NO INDICATION HOW
THE VISITING RABBIS REACTED TO THIS PROPOSAL.

4. FOLLOWING THE MEETING, THE GROUP ANNOUNCED THAT
IT WOULD MEET WITH VARIOUS POLITICAL LEADERS AND SAID
THAT SINCE PRIME MINISTER BEGIN HAD PROMISED THAT
ON RELIGIOUS ISSUES ALL KNESSET MEMBERS WOULD BE PER-
MITTED TO VOTE ACCORDING TO THEIR OWN CONSCIENCES, IT
EXPECTED THAT THE GOVERNMENT, EVEN THOUGH THE PRIME
MINISTER FAVORED CHANGES IN THE LAW OF RETURN, WOULD
NOT BE ABLE TO MUSTER A MAJORITY.

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5. COMMENT. THIS LATTER ESTIMATE IS PROBABLY
CORRECT, SINCE MOST OF THE LIBERALS ARE NOT EXPECTED
TO VOTE WITH THE GOVERNMENT ON THIS ISSUE.

6. THE LAW OF RETURN (OR WHO IS A JEW) IS A DELICATE
POLITICAL ISSUE FOR BEGIN AND HAS BOTH DOMESTIC AND EXTERNAL
IMPLICATIONS. AGUDAT YISRAEL LEADERS HAVE ALREADY
ANNOUNCED THAT THEY MAY QUIT THE COALITION IF THE
GOVERNMENT FAILS TO AMEND THE LAW. THUS, THE PRIME
MINISTER NEEDS TO SUPPORT AMENDMENTS TO THE LAW TO
RETAIN SOME OF HIS COALITION PARTNERS BUT GOING TOO
FAR WITH THE AMENDMENTS WOUL ALIENATE JEWS ABROAD,
ESPECIALLY IN THE U.S. THE MEETINGS DESCRIBED
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ABOVE, AS WELL AS THE EARLIER MEETINGS WITH THE
SAME GROUP WHILE HE WAS IN NEW YORK LAST MONTH,
DEMONSTRATES THE SERIOUSNESS OF THE SECOND HALF
OF BEGIN'S DILEMMA.
LEWIS

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